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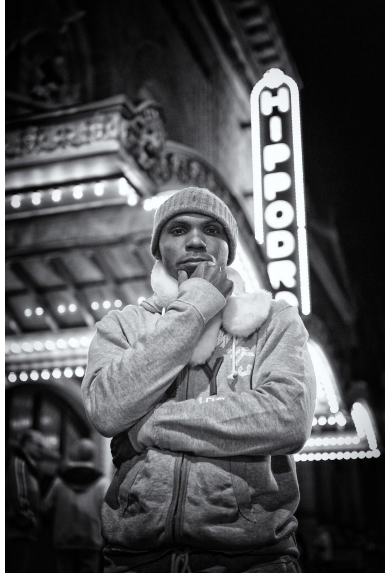


Photo by Rarah

Von Vargas' new album pays tribute to an iconic Baltimore landmark

By Al Shipley
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When Lavonne Smith, a Baltimore rapper and producer who performs under the name Von Vargas, began work on his fourth album, the initial title he had in mind was "Echelon Season." Then hometown pride kicked in and he started to think of an homage beyond the typical *Wire* dialogue snippets and modified Orioles logos that other local MCs have used to signify where they're from.

"We got so much rich heritage here, you know, Billie Holiday, you know what I mean? Pennsylvania Avenue was the joint years ago, so much talent," the soft-spoken Smith, who grew up on the west side, not far from [Lexington Market](#), recalled recently in a Security Boulevard eatery. "I feel like some of the great things that we have about ourselves should be exposed. And it's not the [Inner Harbor](#) or crabs-Lexington Market is the one of the longest-running markets in the world, that's huge to me."

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And so, in October, Von Vargas released *World Famous Lexington Market*, named for the local landmark that's been open since 1782. Instead of a concept album, however, Smith simply used the title as a framework for a strong set of songs. "With each song, it was like, 'OK, what's the concept?' Sit down and take it from there. I just had that title in mind, but there's not too much I can say about Lexington Market for an hour. But if you think about a market, people go to market to get food, substance. Whether it's bad food or good food, it's still some sort of substance. So I feel my music, it gives some sort of substance, in one way or another."

The album's centerpiece is a nine-minute suite of two tracks, "So Cold" and "One Last Trip," that run together with the same stirring, atmospheric beat. On the former, Vargas duets with one of his labelmates, female singer Ronika, for a brooding, emotional song. On the latter, Vargas interviews his godsister Trina about the events that led to her recent imprisonment abroad for drug trafficking—a startling, real moment in the middle of a rap album, where tales of crime are usually told in silly, fictionalized skits.

"I asked her, 'Can I sit down with you, and just tell me everything,'" Smith recalls. "So she gave me 30 minutes of everything, what happened, and I chopped it up and made it a three-minute song. She cried like three times. I had to record, I wanted to stop it when she was cryin', but I said, 'nah, man, I need that real emotion,' because that's what she dealt with, that's what she was going through, and she not the only one that dealt with it. So I feel like if we could give [that to] some other people then maybe it can help change the course of somebody else's life."

Smith, at 35, is an unabashed hip-hop traditionalist who speaks openly about his love for '80s classics and the generation gap he feels with younger MCs. But *World Famous Lexington Market*, despite its nods to history, is no exercise in nostalgia, and bangers like "That Good Good" feel thoroughly 2012. And at a time when some of rap's biggest stars are hitting their 40s, and one of the year's breakout stars, [2 Chainz](#), is 36, he seems appropriately unconcerned with a few gray hairs slowing his roll.

Smith started out in the '90s, working with several other Baltimore musicians who landed record deals and flirted with fame, including R&B stars Ruff Endz. "It was a couple times where I did some work where people offered me deals and stuff like that, and at the time I didn't take 'em because I felt like I wasn't ready," he says. But he also recalls the thrill of hearing himself on the radio for the first time, when a Washington, D.C. station played a collaboration with the Boy Blesst, another Baltimore rap veteran who still records today and who appears on *World Famous Lexington Market*.

But Smith has found his way onto the airwaves in other, more unusual ways. "I come up just being a musician, I started out as a drummer, then taking keyboard classes, and went from that to DJing. I was DJing in almost every club in Baltimore: Paradox, Hammerjacks. And then from there, I started using what I had to do radio commercials." His biggest success in that arena was a TV ad for the now-shuttered menswear store Changes. "This one jingle, if I'd've had my royalty situation straightened out, it would've been great. 'Cause they got played everywhere—[BET](#), [ESPN](#), HDTV—for two years straight off this one jingle."

Over the years, Smith has mastered the art of selling his own product and has managed to make it a major part of his income. Though he never sold CDs at Lexington Market, he made a killing at flea markets.

"I did North Point for a whole year. Just off a year of selling an album and giving 'em a [free] mixtape with it, I made \$15 grand just on Saturdays alone," he notes with pride. "But it's still gotta be quality, that's why it would sell, because it was quality. Or the way it looked, they was like 'Yo, I'ma buy it just because it looked good.'" His wife, a graphic designer, has been instrumental in the eye-catching artwork for Von Vargan albums. "She's my biggest supporter, man. If it wasn't for her, I probably would be jacked up right now."

Today, though, with the help of his wife, Smith has his business together and is making some of the best music of his long career. And if success comes calling, he won't turn away an opportunity because he doesn't feel ready. "Sometimes I get upset when dudes think it should happen overnight, because if you here for longevity, it's not gon' happen overnight. If you a one-night wonder, what's gonna happen five years down the line?"

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